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Striking Encounters: Problematics with Experience, Reflexivity and Learning

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Dr Cathie Pearce is a Research Fellow at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her research is focussed upon critical everyday diversities, reflexive issues that impact and run through educational contexts. She also has an interest in exploring the complex inter relationships between different spheres e.g. teaching, social relations, language where the aim is always to make a difference for and with the people, places and projects that she engages with.

Abstract

This article seeks to explore a series of encounters where we engage with research with a view to learning differently. We argue that every encounter is a form of research if we can marshal the connecting threads and consider the individual as both singularity and collective. We use reflexivity to go beyond reflection and strive to construct knowledge as individual and collective purpose. We draw upon striking examples to explore how issues of learning, reflexivity and pedagogy develop thinking in education, especially in HE. We seek to move beyond accounts of experience that merely describe and report and which borrow from humanistic accounts of a subject (one which both experiences and who thinks) an approach which we dub “De(s)-carting”. We then move towards explorations which seek more engaged, concrete, ethical approaches that open up possibilities and offer alternative conceptions of working with experience in education, in all its variety.

The problematics of experience

In order to draw attention to the problematic nature of experience and why this matters for education, we would first like to explore the question of the question.

Questions are a central tenet in education as they are in philosophy. We privilege questions and rarely question their authority. We can have better or worse questions but we use them with regularity with students, on research bids, in our teaching yet we rarely pause, let alone stop to ask how and why such an interrogative approach is so closely aligned with both education and philosophy. Drawing upon philosophers who consider thought as movement rather than entity (Nietzsche, Derrida, Deleuze), we consider a responsible listening to language and where thought movements are multiple rather than unitary. We seek to trace how and why this might be, by examining our own engagements and thinking as educators.

We have chosen to focus on encounters as experiences which for whatever reasons lingered with us. They arose from personal, professional, emotional realms and we dubbed them ‘Striking Encounters’ as all but one invoked strong emotions, tears even, and we strongly resonated with each others. We asked questions (as good educators do!) and the questions moved: We charted their movements:

Phase I: What encounter lingered with us?

What happened?

Phase II: What shines through?

What exactly is being expressed?

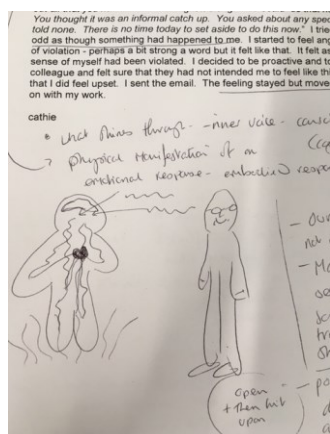
Phase III: What is left hanging?

What is still unthought?

To understand what might be problematic about this, an example is offered of how these questions ran through a striking encounter and with what affect.

Encounter 1: *Resonance and memory thinking.*

An encounter with a colleague/line manager which had stayed with one of the authors for some time. A short, written narrative of the anonymised encounter was shared with the group. (phase 1 questions) We each read each others and commented (phase II questions). We then considered our responses in a subsequent recorded meeting (phase III questions). The following insert illustrates a colleague's response to this encounter.



[excerpt from phase II

data]

We had read each other's
encounters that had

striking examples. They were of
lingered with us for whatever reason;

personal, professional, political, human. We had offered them to each other and had come together to respond. We asked two questions of each account: What shines through? and What exactly is being expressed? We read, made notes, doodled and recorded our conversations.

If encounters are not experiences as such but events then how might we understand their structure? Something recurs, survives, endures, shines through. Some 'thing' is expressed, declared, communicated, and resonates. I was struck by the image, the flame, the burning. For Heidegger, spirit is

flame. Flames are both productive and destructive. For Derrida, it is the ‘flame which inflames’ as it both takes and gives. (Derrida 1991, p87) Both grasp the simultaneity of construction and destruction; the possibilities and closures; the generative and decreasing momentum which might be afforded

For Heidegger, ‘language speaks’ , for Adorno ‘language itself acquires a voice’ and for Derrida ‘language promises.’¹ Each philosopher/theorist acknowledges that language cannot be used to fix meaning and that there is generative and performative potential in all language uses. We often associate humour with the range of possibilities that language can swing between; assigning and ascribing new meanings, differing connotations when put in new contexts.

As we shared and read each others examples, words and phrases were offered, repeated, reoffered, taken up by others, dropped by some of us, repeated, sometimes changed and so on. This is language in a collective sense as well as individual. It is neither one nor the other but *both* collective and individual.

Thomas Khun (1962) changed our conception of knowledge when he noticed that declarative textbooks portrayed knowledge as fixed and universal and masked the politics, inevitable uncertainties and indecision that lies in all attempts to pin meanings and language down. In our examples, we have the same problems as meanings are on the move within our own accounts as well as between each others. Language is on the move and memory and time have intervened. Even the most innovative of science practices acknowledged the uncertain, ambiguous and subjunctive nature of language in relation to knowledge and still we insist on separating theory and practice in many educational contexts. It is our contention in this article to emphasis the importance of listening *to* language, to notice what comes to thought and to recognise and work with a pedagogy of encountering. There are few who question the way we use language in our relations with one another; there

¹ Heidegger famously writes of language speaking in his 1950 lecture Language. Hofstaeffer refers to Adorno talking about thought as movement in her chapter Adorno and Performance (2014) In Daddario, W. and Gritzman, K. and of ‘language itself acquiring a voice’ and Derrida writes extensively about how language promises, defers etc

are even fewer who oppose the way in which language is structuring and changing our relations with each other and with our students. We propose to look at the ways in which our own engagements can help us rethink how we might put our striking encounters to work in both research and teaching. Methodologically speaking, it is a bringing together of a range of instances that have been perceived in isolation and giving them a starting point for meaning.

There are societies in which occurrences, as pure contingency, are experienced as unbearable: they are interpreted to slot them into a structure, to make them into a normal expected order of things (Auge, 2014, p.1)

Each of the encounters offered gives a content to the future by occurring. Our pasts influence our futures but are not determined by them. We attempt to account for the encounter initially by slotting it into familiar plot lines, known narrative structures in our efforts to communicate and share something of the experience. Questions are assumed. In example one, the narrative was constructed in response to the question, What happened? but what is also implicit is that some “thing” has happened, some force, injustice, cruelty which then invokes a need to redress, rebalance. Have the questions crafted the response? If taken literally, this author is telling herself stories and yet in re-reading we are caught up in a new rhythm of the narrative and of expectation (even when we remember what we wrote). We come across forgotten details or aspects that go unnoticed on the first round. In other words we do not necessarily have the same emphasis, the same gaze the same interpretation. We are, above all, mortal beings and as such we are situated in time and engaged with time. Our relations with ourselves and to others change and are changing constantly.

In the following examples, we seek ways of exploring how our values, engagements, investments and boundaries run through these acts of encountering. Such aspects are taken for granted in many methodological approaches. Here we attempt as Blanchot suggests “to see with our minds and

think with our eyes” (1982, p3) in paying attention to what comes to thought and how our fragmented “I’s’ run through systems, objects and processes.

Encounter 2: What am I?

In a second striking example, the scenario is an encounter based in a local primary school context. Our colleague is engaged in a ‘learning walk’² having been invited by a school leader to offer advice on the school’s provision for bilingual children. It is an emotional experience as well as a mental and sensory one. The *“welcome posters clung shrinkingly, perhaps feeling rather unwelcome, ignored and unseen”* [written data from the encounter].

What am I, if not this fragile and tenacious will to understand? Shared awareness of this private tension defines the highest level of sociality, the most intense relation to others, the encounter. (Auge, 2014, p.100)

The encounter was ‘recent’ ‘negative’ and ‘confidential’ and we had read a short written account in response to the initial question, what had happened? We were struck by the intensity of the responses, the urgent need for interpretation when ‘ chests tighten’ and uncomfortableness prevails. Writing in response to what shines through? and what exactly is being expressed? our colleague wrote,

“I had feared I may be a colonialist in the teaching of English to a perceived needy group. However a focus on bilingualism is more to do with the creation of that ethical public space I would like to mutually inhabit. This would see teachers as part of a demos that strives to be inclusive of a

² Learning walks are commonly used in UK schools as activities to improve whole school development. In 2013 one of the leading national teachers unions (NUT) drew up guidelines for ‘learning walks’ to ensure that they were developmental and constructive activities rather than judgemental.

multiplicity of words and worlds, a form of encounter that is sharing in our shared spaces. The alternatives make us hidden from and fearful of each other.” [written data from the encounter]

Kuehner, Ploder and Langer (2016) draw our attention to a reflexive conviction for an epistemological necessity to clarify what kind of knowledge can and should be produced in any given subject-object constellation. In this second striking encounter there is a traceable movement which sees this very search and which goes beyond just mere reflection of the researcher’s position. Working with how the traces and imprints of our social locations, biographies, professional histories and world views interact with each other is crucial in exploring our relations with our research. It is to speak of the very doubts, uncertainties, anxieties and uncomfortableness that happens when research matters and touches upon our very souls. And yet to speak of these uncertainties and worries, which can and do happen in research, is still relatively uncommon in everyday academia.

In tracing the imprints and interpretations from the first writing of this second striking encounter, there was, the by now familiar, plot lining which the first striking encounter also employed. In response to the question, What happened? we story an account that says, this happened. We employ our familiar tropes and narrative devices to story an account and which places the subject in firm relation to the object of the research. The researcher is observing the researched. The subject is (and in this case, quite literally) gazing at the objects, the ‘evidences’ of misunderstandings, the ‘crimes’ of ignorance and exclusion. In reading the second written account, in response to the questions, what shines through? and what exactly is being expressed? the researcher is positioned alongside and the uncertainties are more visible, more audible.

“I would not have considered the term ‘generosity’ around language use were it not suggested to me. Was it that he [the teacher] was mean and sparing? Too unkind perhaps to allow the luxury of languages in the multiple? Generous with English maybe but what underpinned that ‘no’ to use of

home language? That erasure at the door? Was it a lack of generosity or more than that which resulted in the aversion to children speaking their own language? Why the aversion? [written data from the encounter]

The account itself has become multiple moving from a singular account of an event ‘the learning walk’ to multiple possible interpretations, a search for meaning or possible meaning. Questions of ‘fact’ have given way to questions of why, possible explanations, possible reasoning, possibility itself.

The notion of encounter suggests a kind of confronting or confrontation as both our first and second striking examples indicate. In a different sense the idea of an encounter also invokes empathy. Both empathy and confrontation inhabit the idea of an encounter and no encounter can be one way only. This dynamic means that embedded in the idea of an encounter there is also an opening, a beginning, an adventure, a freedom whether or not these possibilities are ever realised.

Encounter 3: a remembering of a remembering.

“Getting off the bus near home, I was walking quickly in the cold air, and came abreast with a young woman going in the same direction. Just as I reached for a tissue, as the cold air had made me sniff, the young woman turned to me and asked, “are you alright?”. I quickly reassured her that I was and she said she thought i was crying which is why she asked. I was possibly almost too effusive in my rush to thank her for her concern, as I did not want her to feel rebuffed, or embraced at having asked, lest in a future occasion she should hesitate when someone was in fact in need.”
[written data from the encounter]

The above scenario sat alongside the remembering of a second encounter which had happened some years previously.

*“I found myself remembering a previous occasion nearly ten years ago. This time I **was** crying, and very visibly so. I was on a train from Poitiers to Paris, having had a call that my father-in-law was seriously ill. I had immediately changed my itinerary and was on my way to Charles de Gaulle [airport] to catch an early flight home. On the train I took the call that my father-in-law had died. Despite my obvious distress where I struggled to stop crying for quite some time, not a single person on the train asked if I was alright.” [written data from the encounter]*

It is in the sphere of relationships, or social meaning, that our fragility can be seen.

All can be understood by all; all can speak to all; if not, the likelihood is of symbolic exclusion, living death, the arrest of time. (Auge, 2014, p.24)

And yet each act of remembrance is also a new beginning - both an ‘echo and an extension’ as Marc Auge might put it (Auge, 2014, p25). The tension between meaning and the freedom to express is at its peak in both these accounts. Our colleague speculates “do we need words at times like this?” and “what gestures might there be?” both questions are future orientated; both relate to the tension between the individual and the collective. In this third striking example, the initial encounter is conveyed as both ordinary and extraordinary and almost astonishing in its happening, certainly unannounced, unexpected and new. The second conveys disappointment, an illusion or rather disillusion of humanity alienated from where it could be or should be. So both the familiar refrain of comfort (are you alright?) and the sudden bolt of instantaneous emotion, ephemeral but very real which can pierce us and as Auge (ibid:26) writes,

...but that now, far from awakening the past, liberates the faint, fleeting, tenacious suggestion that whatever our age, whatever our problems, **something** is still possible; that life can be conjugated in the future tense? (Auge ibid, p.26)

Encounter 4: two related scenarios

It is in the fine connection running between these themes which brings us to our fourth striking encounter which is actually two related encounters that happened within minutes of each other.

It is a Friday night in Manchester. The streets are busy with people. My colleague and I along with our respective partners are heading back to the car after an evening out.

Scenario 1

A cyclist tries to edge past my partner forcing her onto the muddy grass, which is unfortunate as she is wearing white trainers. It turns out that he is an ex pupil of hers. There is a brief exchange. He refers to her as 'Miss C'. She does not name him. As we walk on, she struggles to remember who he is. It bothers her and she becomes preoccupied.

Scenario 2

Minutes later we turn a corner and....

"Hi A" We all stop and I look up to a smiling woman wearing a thick wooly bobble hat. I don't know who she is. I become a little flustered and hope that no one registers my discomfort. Who is she? How does she know me? What do I say next?

“We all went out after the session” she says.

Then it comes to me. She is a student from a seminar I had taken that afternoon. But I can’t name her. I make small talk and after what feels like forever we walk on.

My partner links my arm and laughs. “It was obvious you didn’t have a clue who she was.”

I squirm.

We must reiterate that reflexive work (Stronach, Garratt, Pearce and Piper 2007) cannot just be about the person doing the research. It is the examination of both the structural and personal conditions which help us understand the knowledge we create. (Dean, 2017, p.10)

This fourth striking encounter invokes connectable feelings of uncomfortableness and uncertainty. Forgetting a name, not knowing or remembering a name marks that moment when words and thoughts will not come to us, will not be brought forth into language. Instead, the name lurks on the tip of our tongues, at the back of our minds and refuses to be said, heard, spoken. The situation becomes precarious and uncertain then ‘comes to’ our colleague as a situated situation, a ‘seminar that afternoon’ but still the name will not come.

This uncertainty about our precise situation should not prevent us from acting, from striving to define an ethics of action (Auge, 1999, p119)

To squirm is to recoil, go back on oneself and reflexive accounts ask that we interrogate how meanings are being constructed.

Meaning comes not from seeing or even observation alone for there is no 'alone' of this sort. Neither is meaning lying around in nature waiting to be scooped up by the senses, rather it is constructed. "Constructed' in this context means, produced in the acts of interpretation" (Steedman, 1991, p54)

Although only a few minutes has passed between the two scenarios, the 'gaze' has shifted from the street, the grass, the feet/footwear in the first scenario to the face/head (smile/wooly hat) arms and laughter in scenario 2. The pronoun 'she' runs through both scenarios and is invoked ten times. The account is literally shifted through the body; from feet to head.

The 'I' that squirms has also 'looked up', 'doesn't know' 'has become a little flustered' 'wondering what to say next' 'had taken a seminar that afternoon' 'can't name' and has 'made small talk'. Said like that, we have a decentred subject and one whereby there is an ethical concern to take responsibility for the subjects of research - in both accounts the subjects are pupils and students yet the accounts are told 'in relation' to one another. The insider/outside lines are less delineated - our subjects and objects are not in snow globes here but pushed onto the 'muddy grass' of research where the messiness of encounters makes us question ourselves as well as others.

In following the fragmented 'I's' in terms of actions, the researcher has observed, known/not known, become, spoken, thought, taught, named/not named, made and created. An ethic of watchfulness and of resistance is invoked in an ethos of inquiry.

Encounter 5: who do we think we are anyway?

Thus far we have explored the relevance of our positions, our stories, our accounts, in producing knowledge and insights. To study encounters is to study human relations and this is necessarily an

embedded practice. We have also tried to illustrate how **a** way of thinking need not necessarily be **the** way of thinking and in doing so have attempted to disrupt our habitual and prevailing modes of thought. In doing so we have questioned the beliefs and affects we attached to our understandings. To alter our beliefs also requires that we work upon our affective attachments.

Experience, experiment, reflection, cultivation of spiritual sensibility and resolute action are five dimensions that cannot stray far from each other (Connolly, 2011, p10)

In our next striking example we inquire into a world that “exceeds human powers of attunement, explanation, prediction, mastery or control. And to invite you to do the same, without contending that [we] can drag you there by the force of argument alone” (ibid). In many ways we are always attuned in advance.

“A few days later on a lovely summer, autumnal afternoon I was going for walk on my own. I was at the top of a hill walking a long a ridge and all I could hear was the wind rustling in the trees and as I passed a large tree, thought, why not give it a hug! My arms didn’t even go half way round the trunk but I could feel the warmth of the bark as it faced south as it was around midday it would have been soaking up the weal autumnal sun for a couple of hours at least..... I have been thinking about the idea that we have many encounters with things and than many of them are very significant. The way in which we behave in the privacy of our car, for example, talking to ourselves or to the radio. Our relationship to our beds and in particular the mattress. We spend so many hours in close proximity to this item, it soaks up all our dreams and other subconscious thoughts as well as baring the weight of our weary bodies.

Here actions are speaking louder than words and experience is more than just what happens to us. Different registers open up and there is an appreciation of different force fields other than just our

own human agency. There are palpable little surges of warmth, energy and anticipation. There is a style of openness, a mode of experimentation, a sense of encountering. What lurks in our texts can overflow from previous events in unexpected ways. Something is carried forward, not in the carrier but in the message itself even when it is not being recollected - in fact especially when it is not being recollected. Writers have long since been aware of the 'power of the false' meaning that these surges in energy are frequently operative in literary texts as our texts oscillate between the memory of the event and what happened as they both fold into each other and surge towards the future.

Disparate experiences fold into each other in everyday life, mobilising energy into action orientated perception, sometimes setting the stage for truly novel thoughts. Such processes help to mobilise actions and ethical sensibilities, and - when collected and amplified through micro politics - to infuse the ethos of politics embedded in institutional settings in one way or another (Connolly, 2011, p5)

In appreciating different registers of experience, we are less likely to become attached to a single view. We do not think often about our encounters with 'things' and perhaps just as well or we would be overloaded with information. Yet on the other hand, it is through these strange relations and encounters that we walk, hear, pass on a daily basis, love, connect, soak up, think about and spend time with and dream. Had we even realised that these were the actions that accompanied the above account? "For action requires simplified perception to inform it" (ibid) The tree has long been a metaphor for knowledge in traditional educational worlds, uprooted and democratised by Deleuzian imagery of the rhizome.

A perspective defined by active examination of becoming can make positive contributions to explorations of spirituality, economics, political action, poetic experience and ethics. (Connolly 2011, p8) We would like to add education to this.

In offering these five encounters we have tried not to diminish the complexity of experience in order to account for it. We resist reductionism and try not to eliminate the doubts, uncertainties, ambiguities and divisions, opting instead to work with the contradictions and challenges they bring. As these encounters illustrate, our agenda is not free from paradox and they are often fraught with those ‘nano moments’, as Connolly puts it (Connolly 2011, p78), when events unfold and we are simultaneously aware of how things could be different whilst also having limited capacity to redirect the very events we are narrating. Nietzsche knew this very spot where our wills are necessarily two sided and sometimes at odds with each other. His philosophy was materialist in the sense that he considered basic, multiple forces rather than a ‘spirit’. (Deleuze 2006, p6). “The will to power is not wanting, coveting or seeking power, but only “giving’ or “creating”.” (ibid pxviii) However we also want to resist approaches that render the human so unique that they forget the connections and affinities with non human processes that are at work. We chose the term ‘striking’ to invoke both the human and the non human.³ We would like to make a case for distinction rather than uniqueness in order to emphasise and value those connections and affinities to a larger world. The Cartesian subject that thinks and feels needs to be both with *and* outwith⁴ a larger world in which it dwells. A De(s)-carting which both carries and expresses whilst staying connected with the processes that produce it.

Kuehner, Ploder and Langer (2016) noted that there has been a rise in methodologies and methods such as autoethnography, psychosocial analysis, participatory and peer research. Our engagements with encounters (Pearce, Kidd, Patterson, Hanley, 2012) are aligned with the theoretical convictions of reflexivity Kuehner et al propose in that we explore the implications of a decentred subject and where we explore what kind of knowledge can and should be produced in our endeavours. It is to

³ In a human sense striking is a physical intentional act. In a non human sense, force fields such as electricity and lightning strike too.

⁴ Outwith is a specific Scottish term which conveys the double movement of belonging and beyond

pay attention to the meanings that we produce in the course of our inquiries, to explore the collective consciousness which we create in studying and exploring our own engagements and most importantly to consider thinking itself as movement, trails, collisions, contradictions which strike us. In direct contrast to Rodin's, *The Thinker*, we aim to show how thinking itself is multifarious, necessarily engaged with a wider world, connected with each other and generative rather than reductive. As educators who collectively have many years experience in the field, there is a sense that education has failed to provide responses to the how questions: how are things to improve? how can we reimagine the power of education? how can our everyday encounters ignite our educational imaginations in powerful ways? How might we value and work with experiences which can't be googled?

Thought as movement; as act; as happening. Research as invitation to a space which invites you to enter, to linger for a while with people you feel you can talk with. A purpose is still to question, a mass of connections waiting to be made. Perhaps a further purpose of educational research is not so much to rescue the tale from the person who created it (as D.H. Lawrence might have led us to believe) but to listen carefully to those tales, engage with the striking thoughts, create encounters which enable thoughts to move, shift, act, happen. Perhaps we can rescue the 'stuckness' of our habits, practices and discourses so that they might once again align themselves with others more productively.

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